

On the Governing of Redeeming Grace Church

*I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.
Jesus Christ (Matt. 16:18)*

Purpose

Since its founding in 1979 our church has experienced the blessing of being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:22). We've been instructed by the Word of God, experienced the presence of God, seen the advance of the gospel of God, and grown together as the people of God. Through this time, we've been governed by a team of pastors working in close relationship with Sovereign Grace Ministries (SGM). For the past three years, the pastors have been studying polity (church government) and God has used recent events to lead us to form a Polity Working Group (PWG) to clarify, more carefully, matters related to authority and accountability. The pastors, joined by the PWG, have sought to slow down and listen to Scripture, church history, and godly men from other denominations as we seek to answer one foundational question: *How is Christ's authority expressed in our local church?*

As the PWG reviews and reconsiders our polity, we are seeking to develop principles and convictions that are flexible, simple, and clear. We desire our polity to be anchored in Scripture, focused on Christ, and wise enough to be effective. In short, we desire a church government that will assist, not obstruct our church in our ministry to God in worship, to the saints in edification, and to the world in evangelism and good works.

This paper is intended to provide a framework for our church government. It offers broad principles, not detailed specifics. As with the construction of a house, this paper seeks to sketch out the framework for our polity. More work will follow as we decide on the details, such as the kind of furniture to put in the rooms, what colors to paint the walls, and so on.

We recognize that God provides no detailed book of church order in Scripture. Instead, we are given principles which we are to put into practice as wisely as possible.¹ This means that, though we continually strive for church polity that is as biblical and wise as possible, we will never achieve a perfect polity—one that remains unchanged or that perfectly protects against corruption in the church. The church is *semper reformanda*, always reforming, and this includes our polity. Whatever structures we adopt, and we seek the most biblical possible, they are only as useful as the people using them. Edmund Clowney wisely counsels us, "Better by far are imperfect structures in the hands of devoted servants of Christ than the most biblical form of church government practised [sic] in pride or in a loveless and vindictive spirit."²

¹ See section 3B for more on the function of Scripture in determining church government.

² Edmund Clowney, *The Church*, p. 202.

1. Christ the King and the Head of the Church

As we come to consider questions of church government and leadership we must not assume or leave in the background the most vital fact of all: *the most important leader in the church is Jesus*. “Christ is the head of the church and the source of all its authority.”³

And [God] put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church,

Eph. 1:22

And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

Col. 1:18

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Matt. 28:18

Jesus is the head of the church and the church is His body (1 Cor. 12:12-13). He is the King who rules over the church with authority and power (Isa. 9:6-7). He is our apostle and high priest (Heb. 3:1), our Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4) and the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). He is the vine and the church is the branch (John 15:5). He is the groom and the church is His bride (Rev. 19:7). Whenever we think of the church and its government we will do well if the first person in view is Christ.

Guy Prentiss Waters writes, “there is a close biblical connection between Christ and his church. Christ is the head of his body, the church (Col. 1:18, 24; Eph. 5:23; Acts 9:5). Christ’s interests are bound up with the church. To study and honor the government of the church is to bring glory to Jesus who has instituted that government for his own glory and for his church’s good.”⁴

2. What is the church?

“According to the Bible, the church is the people of God, the assembly of the body of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.”⁵

A. The church universal

When Jesus declares, “I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18), what is he referring to? The church is revealed both as a new reality and as a continuation of an existing one. God promised to make a people for himself from the descendants of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; Exo. 6:7) and the nation of Israel became his covenant community. Jesus comes to make a new covenant. The people of the new

³ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 581.

⁴ Guy Prentiss Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church*, p. xxiii.

⁵ Clowney, p. 28

covenant are the recipients of Christ's finished cross-work and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Yet, as the people of God, we are joined together with all the saints who lived before Christ. The church universal, the church invisible, consists of "the entire community of persons redeemed by Christ – without limitations of time or space."⁶ In this sense, the church is everyone God determined to redeem, everyone He sovereignly chose before time to be in Christ (Eph. 1:4). All Christians are members of the church universal.

B. The church local

There is a second way in which the word "church" (meaning "assembly") is used, which is to refer to a particular body of believers. We read about a church at Cenchreae (Rom. 16:1), or Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2), or Thyatira (Rev. 2:18). Sometimes the word is plural, indicating that there are multiple congregations in an area (1 Cor. 16:1; Gal. 1:2). These local congregations are expressions of the church universal. They reveal locally what is true eternally and globally; that God has made a people for himself, and he has organized them into local assemblies where "Christians will share in the life of a local church, meeting with it for worship (Heb. 10:25), accepting its nurture and discipline (Matt. 18:15-20; Gal. 6:1), and sharing in its work of witness."⁷

3. How is the church governed?

A. Christ governs the church through the Word and by the Spirit.

When we think of how the Lord governs His church, we must not move too quickly to human leadership. The primary means through which Christ governs in the church is through His Word and by His Spirit. In John 15:26, He promises His disciples that He will send the Spirit of truth who will help them and be with them. When He says, "I will come to you," He means that He will be with them through the Spirit. It was by the power of the Spirit that the Bible was written and preserved, and it remains to us sufficient for life, godliness, and every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:3).

B. The role of the Scriptures.

We find in the Bible no book of church order, no details about how many elders a church should have or whether the congregation should vote to receive new members or who makes the final decision to buy property to build a church building. In His wisdom, God has chosen to provide no exhaustive manual of church government.

What He has provided are broad principles that are to be followed by all churches in all places and at all times. These principles may be applied with great flexibility so as to be useful in a variety of settings, from a rural house church in Burma, to a large, multi-staff, suburban congregation like ours. This paper is an

⁶ Robert L. Plummer, *Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission*, p. 44.

⁷ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, p. 202.

attempt to articulate those basic principles as they emerge from the descriptions, examples, and commands of Scripture.

Pastor Mark Lauterbach writes, “Most important in discussing polity, we must distinguish between commands and examples. Commands *prescribe*. The NT gives very little *prescriptive* order for the [governing of the] church. The NT is clear in matters of responsibility and character. It speaks clearly to certain roles for elders and congregations. These form the boundaries for polity.

“Examples *describe* a certain practice. What the NT describes, it often leaves uninterpreted, so we must be careful not to read too much into the descriptions of NT polity. We must be careful of the conclusion that there was a uniform apostolic practice or that apostolic practice was binding.”⁸

Inside the guard rails of the broad principles we find in Scripture, we must make use of Spirit-led wisdom. The Westminster Confession puts it this way: “there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.”⁹

C. Expressions throughout church history

In the course of church history most Protestant churches have adopted one of three forms of church government. Each one has a different understanding of how Christ’s authority is expressed:

- The Episcopalian/Anglican system (from the word *episkopos*, meaning bishop or overseer) highlights the authority of the bishop, an office outside of and above a local congregation (or parish). Each congregation is understood to consist of clergy and laity.
- The Presbyterian system (from the word *presbuteros*, meaning elder) typically functions with an authority outside and above a local congregation, in the form of a general assembly, presbyteries and sometimes synods. Inside a congregation, Presbyterians entrust church members with the power to choose their officers (elders) and share in a few other major decisions, and then the elders lead the way from there.
- The congregational system recognizes no authority outside or above a local church, viewing each congregation as independent and self-governing. Internally they may have elders, but give final decision-making authority to the church members as a whole.

⁸ Mark Lauterbach, *Leadership and Grace Church*, unpublished paper, p. 1.

⁹ Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.6

What is our view? Are there other options? Specifically, is a restoration of the office of the apostle needed for the modern church to become healthy and mature?

In the book of Acts and in the epistles we see apostles given a central role in the planting and strengthening of churches. D. A. Carson writes, “Arguably, the strongest authoritative human voices in the earliest churches were the apostles”.¹⁰ While the apostles may have carried the day in the NT times, we believe that office is no longer functioning in churches today (more under section 7D).

What patterns of leadership and authority emerge from the NT in an enduring way? Two things come into view: elderships and the congregation as a whole. The elders (aka overseers/bishops and pastors) are called to shepherd, lead, teach, and rule (more under section 4). Having said this, there are also times when the congregation seems to hold sway and be the final stop in decision-making (1 Cor. 5:1-5; Matt. 18:17-20; 2 Cor. 2:5-11). How can we speak about this in a way that is faithful to all the biblical data and also keeps it in proper proportion? Here is our proposal:

Christ expresses His authority in our church through the elders with the congregation.

The next sections will explain what we mean by this phrase.

4. Who are the elders and what do they do?

A. Name

When Paul desires to speak to the leaders of the church in Ephesus he calls for the *elders*, reminds them that the Holy Spirit has made them *overseers*, and urges them to *pay careful attention to the flock* (implying that they are shepherds). Here we see the same group of people referred to using the language of elder, overseer (bishop) and shepherd (pastor). We see similar connections in 1 Pet. 5:1-4; 1 Tim. 3:1; 1 Tim. 5:17-18; Eph. 4:11; and Titus 1:5. We believe that the NT uses these terms interchangeably. Each term highlights a unique aspect of leadership. Elder points to experience and wisdom. Overseer to rulership and authority. Pastor to caring, feeding, and protecting.

B. Three qualifications

First, 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 lay out basic character requirements for elders. Fundamentally, they are to be above reproach, or blameless. This does not mean morally flawless or sinless, but it does mean they are to be positive examples to the flock, mature members of the congregation whose lives inspire trust and

¹⁰ D. A. Carson, *Authority in the Church*, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 228.

confidence from the church members (Phi. 3:17; 1 Tim. 4:12; 1 Cor. 3:4-5). Elders are to be men who are godly examples in ordinary life. They are not a unique class or an elite group, they are mature Christians, good examples.

Second, elders must be able to teach God's Word. The elder must "hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also able to rebuke those who contradict it." (Titus 1:9)

Third, elders must desire the work (1 Tim. 3:1). He must do this work out of love for Christ, care for the flock, empowered by the Spirit, and not under compulsion (1 Pet. 5:2).

C. Responsibilities

The primary responsibility of the elders is to bring God's Word into the life of the church through teaching, reading Scripture, and continually proclaiming the glorious gospel of Christ (1 Tim. 3:2, 5:17; 2 Tim. 4:2; Titus 1:9, 2:1). They are to help the members of the church understand Scripture, love Scripture, and apply Scripture. They will give an account to God for how they do that (James 3:1 and Hebrews 13:17).

The elders know, feed, lead, and protect the church. Their leadership is not heavy-handed and authoritarian; it is servant-oriented and sacrificial, following the example of Christ. Their authority derives not from their title or their office. The authority of an elder comes from God and is recognized by the congregation (Acts 20:28; Hebrews 13:7). The church seeks to affirm those whom God has called and gifted among them.

Further, the elders' authority is ministerial, the idea being that pastoral authority is bound up not in the office itself, but in the Bible. "An elder with no Bible is an elder with no authority. (1 Tim. 4:13, 16; 2 Tim. 4:2) A believer with a Bible has authority to ask questions, correct, and pursue the mind of God with the elders. Elders may not step outside the bounds allowed by the Scriptures. (Gal. 1:6-9; 2 Cor. 1:24; 2 Tim. 3:14-4:2) They lead from and to the Word of God, not from and to themselves. They seek for people to follow Christ, not the elders."¹¹

D. Plurality

The consistent pattern in the NT is of a plurality of elders, a shared leadership. There are no examples of churches being led by one elder but there were pluralities in many places (Acts 11:30, 14:23, 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:17; Phi. 1:1). Alexander Strauch writes, "the New Testament provides conclusive evidence that the pastoral oversight of the apostolic churches was a team effort, not the sole responsibility of one person."¹²

¹¹ Lauterbach, p. 6.

¹² Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, p. 35.

While all elders must be gifted to rule and to teach (1 Tim. 3:17-18), no two will be gifted in exactly the same way. Each eldership and each church should be free to allow the unique gifts of each elder to function in whatever ways promotes efficient and effective work within the eldership, and gracious and fruitful labor among the congregation.

E. Selection, compensation, recognition, and removal

Following the general pattern of *Christ expressing His authority through the elders with the congregation*, the church will need to develop flexible, simple, and clear processes for the selection, compensation, recognition, and removal of elders.

A few guidelines:

- Elders must be selected by an established and published process that ensures they are qualified in character and gifting. In general, more time given to this process will allow for hidden weaknesses and hidden graces to emerge (1 Tim. 5:22-25).
- Potential elders should be tested and trained to ensure that their ability to understand and explain doctrine and Scripture is sufficient.
- There needs to be an established and published process for how to bring a complaint or an accusation against an elder (1 Tim. 5:19-25). This should also include a process for appeal by an elder who believes he's been misjudged.
- It is not required that elders be paid, though it may be wise and desirable for some (or all) to be paid (1 Tim. 5:17-18). Wisdom is required. We desire to add non-staff (i.e. non-paid) elders to our eldership.
- Scripture is silent on the number of elders and the term of service for elders.

5. Who are the church members and what do they do?

A. Committed disciples of Jesus

While every Christian is a member of the universal church (1 Cor. 1:2), not every Christian is a member of every local church. Local churches have boundaries (Matt. 18:17), they are communities with members. Church members are those regenerate disciples of Jesus who have committed themselves to one particular local church (Heb. 10:23-25; 13:7,17; Gal. 6:10).

In Christ, every believer and therefore every church member, has full and direct access to God (Heb. 10: 19-22) with Christ as the only mediator (1 Tim. 2:5). This is why Peter could write to Christians and remind them that they were all priests (1 Pet. 2:9). Every disciple of Jesus has been filled with the Holy Spirit, gifted to engage in ministry, and empowered to evangelize and to build up the body of Christ. In the church there is no elite class that has special access to God on the one hand, nor any giftless Christians on the other. Every member, male and female, is enabled to and should engage in meaningful, Christ-exalting works of service.

B. Responsibilities

We see this in the way the New Testament holds out high expectations for the discernment and decision-making ability of church members. Most of the NT letters are written not to church leaders but to whole congregations. Clearly the Holy Spirit expected the average church member to be able to understand and respond to matters of doctrine and practice. For example, church members are expected to participate in decisions about church discipline (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-2) and restoration (2 Cor. 2:5-11). They are held responsible for failing to be doctrinally discerning (Gal. 1:6-9) while being commended for their faith and orderliness (Col. 2:5). Even in a church like Corinth it was assumed that there were church members wise enough to settle disputes between brothers (1 Cor. 6:1-8). In one case, church members themselves selected their candidates for a new kind of church leader (Acts 6:1-7). Just as church leaders work with church members for their joy (2 Cor. 1:24), so church members work with their leaders for *their* joy (Heb. 13:17).

6. How are decisions made?

Let's put this all together. How does it work out in real life? How is the decision made to install an elder? Or to discipline one? To accept someone into church membership? Or to discipline a church member? To make significant financial decisions? Or doctrinal ones?

We return to our thesis: *Christ expresses His authority in our church through the elders with the congregation.* The power of Christ rests with the whole body of the church, including elders and members. This means the elders are to provide direction and leadership, to rule well (1 Tim. 5:17), shepherding the flock of God with the Word of God. This is to be done in close and respectful partnership with the rest of the church members, who will have an active role in all major decisions. We desire the elders to lead well so that the congregation can joyfully affirm their leadership (1 Thess. 5:12-13). If the congregation cannot affirm the direction of the elders, they should have every opportunity to express questions, disagreements, and alternatives.

Will all decisions be made in the same way? No. The NT reveals a certain tension in decision-making by local churches¹³, with the elders generally leading, but with the congregation having final say in some matters. Therefore we think it appropriate for the congregation to participate in key decisions either informally or through a vote. Key decisions include the selection of elders, the discipline of elders, the acceptance and discipline of church members, significant financial decisions, substantive changes to our statement of faith, and decisions regarding our affiliation with other churches. Each of these categories (and others not listed) will require careful

¹³ See the comments made by D. A. Carson in, "Defining Elders" p 7, http://workliferhythm.org/CC/article/0,,PTID314526_CHID598016_CIID2157886,00.html, accessed 7/18/12.

consideration about how to best preserve the expression of Christ's work through the elders and the members.

7. What are other expressions of leadership in the church?

A. Deacons

Elders are one of two NT offices that continue to the present. The second is that of the deacon (the Greek word *diakonos* means "servant" or "helper"). Paul opens one of his letters saying, "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons." (Phil. 1:2). 1 Tim. 3:8-13 provides character qualifications for deacons that are similar to those for elders, requiring not sinless perfection but a godly and blameless life. Acts 6:1-6 is often appealed to as the model for deacons. Here, there was a practical need in the life of a growing church and the leaders invited the congregation to select 7 men to handle the problem. While this may model a diaconal role, we should bear in mind that these men are never referred to as deacons and the church leaders weren't elders; they were the 12 apostles.

Deacons differ from elders in that they are not required to teach, indicating that their ministry is oriented in directions of mercy, service, and administration, rather than ruling through teaching. This office seems to provide wide latitude to promote the work of ministry in and through the church in a way that involves many members in weighty and meaningful ways while protecting the elders from becoming overwhelmed with the many needs of the flock.

May women serve as deacons? [Note: The PWG has not been able to work through this important question, so this section awaits their proposal.]

We desire to have deacons functioning in our church and look forward to pursuing this after we've defined other matters that relate more directly to the expression of Christ's authority in our church.

B. Various expressions by church members

We desire that each member of our church find ways to serve and lead as they are gifted by the Spirit and trained, equipped, and empowered to do so.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord;⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

1 Cor. 12:4-7

C. Women and Men Together in Church

We affirm that women and men are both alike in being made in God's image, corrupted by sin, and redeemed by Christ. As the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each is fully God, yet work together harmoniously in distinct, non-

interchangeable roles, so women and men in the body of Christ reflect the very nature of God as they function together harmoniously in their unique capacities. In the home and the church God has provided a unique responsibilities to men as husbands and elders, but this in no way signifies superiority.

There are many leadership roles available to women in the church, from discipling younger women (Titus 2:3-5), to carrying out the 'one anothers' of the NT to leading in various capacities that do not include the kind of ruling and teaching set aside for the elders. We desire all the women of our church to use the gifts given them by the Spirit and to be involved in fruitful ministry.

D. Apostles and prophets

In the NT we see apostles and prophets functioning. Jesus calls 12 apostles. Paul is personally summoned by Christ and commissioned as an apostle. There are several others, such as Barnabas (1 Cor. 9:6; Acts 14:14), Silvanus (1 Thess. 2:6-7), or James (Gal. 1:19), who are also referred to as apostles. There were prophets who came from Jerusalem to Antioch (Acts 11:27) and there were "prophets and teachers" (Acts 13:1) in Antioch. Eph. 4:11-12 tells us that the ascended Christ "gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry." Is this a list of offices and are they all functional today?

Historically, SGM has taught that apostles are still functioning today, though not in the same capacities as in the NT. No modern-day apostles are eyewitnesses to the resurrection, nor are they given the same kind of authority which resulted in the NT writings coming from the apostles or those in their circle. In recent years, SGM has backed away from using the language of apostles and has proposed that, while the apostolic office no longer exists, apostolic ministry continues in the form of men who are uniquely gifted to plant and build churches. They are currently reviewing and defining their own polity.

It is our conviction that the office of the apostle ceased with the death of the original apostles. In Acts and the pastoral epistles, we see elders being appointed, we learn of qualifications for elders, but we see no parallel appointments or qualifications for apostles (or prophets). At no time do we ever see an apostle appointing a successor. In the early days of the church, apostles and prophets functioned in a way that helped to lay the foundation for the church (Eph. 2:20). This foundation includes their ministries and also the authoring of the Scriptures which came directly from them or from their testimony and recollections. Apostolic ministry continues in the church today, carried forward in the apostolic gospel and teaching, the sound doctrine preserved for us in the 27 books in our NT.

The Book of Church Order in the Presbyterian Church of America puts it this way, "Under the New Testament, our Lord at first collected His people out of different

nations, and united them to the household of faith by the ministry of extraordinary officers who received extraordinary gifts of the Spirit and who were agents by whom God completed His revelation to His Church. Such officers and gifts related to new revelation have no successors since God completed His revelation at the conclusion of the Apostolic Age.”¹⁴

To say that these offices have ceased is not to say that prophecy has ceased nor that God no longer gives gifts to men to plant churches. Our understanding of the offices has changed, but we remain continuationists and charismatics, expecting the Spirit to give gifts for the advance of the gospel and the edification of the church.

8. Is there church government outside of and above our local church?

A. Each church is independent and self-governing

We believe our church is to be independent and self-governing. Here we must part ways with our Anglican, Methodist, and Lutheran brethren who believe that there is a third office, that of a bishop, which exists outside of the local church and has authority over local churches. Bishops may, for example, appoint pastors or represent the denomination in owning the church property. We find no biblical support for this third office nor for an authority structure that exists outside and above the local church. We also respectfully disagree with the Presbyterian system which invests ecclesiastical authority in presbyteries and synods, thus creating authority above and outside of local congregations. In this sense we join our Congregationalist and Baptist brethren in believing that each local church is independent and autonomous in its governance.

B Associations are desirable

Though we believe our church is to be governed independently and autonomously, this doesn't mean we should exist without seeking connection and association with other churches. We see many connections between churches in the NT (Acts 15; 2 Cor. 8-9; Col. 4:7-17) that helped promote church planting and helped strengthen existing churches. Paul himself provided much of the 'glue' that kept churches connected and while we do not expect his apostolic ministry to continue today, we do expect the Spirit to provide relational connections between churches. These connections may facilitate church planting, provide training for leaders, retreats for members, financial support for congregations in need, counsel for difficult situations, and so on.

C. What's next?

Joining together with like-minded congregations, especially those in our area, is a vital means of fulfilling God's call to us as a church. Whatever relationships,

¹⁴ Presbyterian Church of America Book of Church Order, 7-1.

associations, and church connections we enter in to, we will preserve the self-governing autonomy of our local church.

God has called us out of darkness and into the light so that we could be a light to the world around us. He has summoned us to worship Him and also to proclaim him here and to the ends of the earth. We trust that God will provide the relationships we need in order to further His purposes, to the praise of His glorious grace.

To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Tim. 1:17)

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to sketch out the basic framework for how we believe Christ expresses His authority in our local church. We believe:

- Christ is the King, Chief Shepherd, and Head of our church.
- Christ rules primarily through His Word and by His Spirit.
- Humanly speaking, Christ's rule is expressed in our church through the elders with the congregation.
- The elders should function in plurality, be biblically qualified, and teach, lead, care for, and know the flock.
- The members of the church should have an active role in the life and direction of the church and should have the opportunity to respond to the direction of the elders. This will be both informal, through conversations and dialogue, and formal, through a vote on key areas.

This paper is intended to provide a reference point for dialogue and discussion. As consensus emerges between the elders, the Polity Working Group, and church members, these principles will need to be developed into concrete policies and processes that can then be translated into our by-laws. All this will be done in an open, transparent manner.

*Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly
than all that we ask or think,
according to the power at work within us,
²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
throughout all generations,
forever and ever. Amen.
Eph. 3:20-21*

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